

Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?

When Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary, the mother of James go to the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter Sunday, they find the stone rolled away. Two men in dazzling garments are there and ask them a question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead." (Luke 24:5).

They then go to tell the others who don't believe at first until Peter runs to the tomb and is amazed that it is true.

One of the things that is prevalent at this moment is the intense grief that all are dealing with. In my prior parish in Delano at Saint Peters, there was a beautiful stained glass window of Mary Magdalene weeping, not yet seeing Jesus who is standing next to her. Peter and the others are afraid but also overcome with grief too. Then, this all changes when they experience the joy of the risen Lord.

All of us know the pain that they were going through, for we all suffer loss.

Twenty-one years ago, I was in seminary and serving as an acolyte at the cathedral for Easter Sunday Mass. The plan that day was to then have dinner as my family, and visit my grandpa Henry who was in a nursing home in transition, as he had been recently released from the hospital. Unfortunately when I arrived with my parents at the nursing home, we learned that my grandpa had passed on peacefully while we were at Mass.

Naturally there was grief and it cast a shadow over the day. But with it, there was also hope. Because my grandfather is a man who to me always seemed to have a deeper focus in his life. He cared deeply about his faith, faithfully praying from his well-worn prayer book my mom got him when she was growing up in the 60s, and faithfully going to Mass every weekend. He also cared about the people around him, filling my childhood and teen years with a lot of great memories. He lived in this world, while preparing for the next.

But I also knew that he was at peace with where he was going. When I visited him in the hospital, and the doctors had some confusion over his heart rhythm, he conveyed to me a sense that he would be passing on soon. But with this was no anxiety, but rather a sense of peace. Indeed, I had the same experience from my grandmother who passed on just a year later. I hope and pray to have that fortitude and peace when my own Good Friday approaches.

How I would love to see my grandparents again, have an Easter meal, share some stories, and enjoy our time as a family. I won't get those moments back. But I know that they are risen, with our Lord, because that was His promise to us all. The challenge for us is to truly let the hope and joy of what the three women experienced into our lives so that we too can remember our lives do not end in ashes.

For one, we take comfort knowing that we are loved more than we can imagine. All that we've been reflecting upon in Lent and this past week is of the greatest love story ever told. As I say in one of the Eucharistic Prayers (IV), "having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." God does not love us for what we do; God loves us for who we are, people created in His image. And nothing can separate us from that.

Second, as we celebrate Easter, I think of those who have entered eternal life like my grandparents, and I think of what I can do to continue my transformation. Why did grandpa pray every morning? Why were the pages in his prayer book darkened with thumb prints over decades of use? Because he was always trying to grow closer to the Lord. Because he knew that Jesus saying to him "come follow me" meant a lifetime of trying to learn the full meaning of those words. Transformation isn't about 40 days of Lent; it's about a lifetime. So as I continue my journey, I too look at myself and say how can I overcome sin; how can I grow in holiness; what do I need to do to be even better. My guess is you know people in your life too who you've lost who help you to answer this question.

Third, I remember that even though I won't be having ham with some of my loved ones, they journey with me every day. I have no doubt they are praying for me as I continue my journey through life. I look at the photos, the things they made for me, and the memories and have a good feeling, but also an inspiration - to strive to be like them in how they lived out the washing of the feet that Jesus told us to do for one another in so many ways. My hope is that you do the same knowing that as your loved ones made a difference for you, you can put that into action too and do the same for one another.

Easter reminds us that death does not have the last word; life does. For us who are here, that does not mean there is no pain with death. Sometimes you just feel sad or need some time alone; sometimes you just need to grieve. But where we are going is a place that eye has not seen and ear has not heard; a joy beyond anything we can imagine. To get there though requires a response to the invitation Jesus gives us to follow Him. On this Easter, where we all have people we wish we were sitting down with who aren't physically here, may we never forget that while we visit their graves here on earth, once we die, we are outside of time and earth, and they are with our Lord whose love now envelops them forever. And may the reality of the empty tomb of our Lord reminds us too that one day, in heaven, every tear will be wiped away as we again are reunited in joy, happiness and peace. And may we also go forward knowing that helping us to get there is our Lord, but also the great people he has filled our lives with, who are not dead, but alive with Him, spurring us on. Let us not remain on Ash Wednesday. For while we do return to dust, all of that is changed because of what Jesus has done for us, for life is changed, not ended.

Alleluia, He is risen, and so are we!

Have a blessed Easter,

Fr. Paul